

December 2024



### *Can you believe it?*

This is the 216<sup>th</sup> issue of the newsletter. I began it back in 2007 as an exercise in getting to grips with the subject of hostas. Why not learn about them and write at the same time I thought.

The more I find out, the more I feel I am only scratching the surface, but it has been an enjoyable learning curve. You never stop learning and as we all face a changing environment due to the effects of climate change, there is still more to learn and experiment with, and more to share.

So, how to take the newsletter on into 2025... read on to find out more.



### *Successes and failures*

Although gardening is great for your health and wellbeing, it can also be frustrating, especially when you lose something you were desperate to have success with. I am often asked to recommend hostas that are fool-proof, but the last thing you should do is blame yourself if a plant fails. Obviously if you neglect to water plants you cannot expect them to thrive but what happens when they have so much water they cannot process it, damp off and die? Immature plants are always more susceptible to extremes of wet and dry and as we experience more of this type of weather, the risk of loss increases.

We always suggest you pot on miniature, small and some medium sized cultivars gradually as they generally have finer root systems that need to be protected from extremes until they establish their root systems and become more resilient. A large body of soil can exacerbate dry or wet conditions. Conversely, a well established root system is going to appreciate more room to grow. Most medium to giant-sized varieties can go straight in the ground but be aware of surrounding plants. Don't expect a hosta to be able to fight with an oak tree for supremacy!

### *Nursery update*

This autumn the weather has been much kinder to us, and our plans to get more hard landscaping work done.



Although the days have been overcast and damp since the end of the season, it has essentially been dry so the ground has recovered enough to get some heavy plant in to tackle the rest of the fence line

Sometimes unexpected things do happen. Several years ago we lost both our well-established collection plants of [H. 'Stiletto'](#) over winter. Both plants were among others and had the same conditions as those other plants. There was nothing in the soil to indicate a problem or any explanation we could come up with other than perhaps this cultivar has a finite life-span. One of the reasons we grow multiple pots of each variety is to guard against loss but to lose both plants at the same time was something we hadn't experienced before.

### Good genes

Over the years I have learned a lot about the importance of parentage in judging the potential of a cultivar. If a variety has strong, reliable parentage then this is a good indicator of the strength of that plant. However, this isn't always the case and sometimes a new introduction fails to perform, perhaps because it doesn't have the best of the parent's characteristics to do well. Also, some really tricky cultivars, often the ones with unstable variegation, can prove to be good parents for breeding into more stable offspring. A good example of this is [H. 'Dorothy Benedict'](#), which is always trying to sport into a stronger version of itself to survive, and has to be actively divided to maintain the mottled variegation. Yet it has produced some beautiful offspring when crossed with other species and cultivars – see the newsletter archive for a [4-part series on H. 'Dorothy Benedict'](#).

My learning curve with the genus was greatly enhanced by delving into the subject of parentage. I found that the specific characteristics that attract me to certain cultivars hold their secrets in the parentage, and that many of them originate in species that can be tricky to grow, especially in pots. You would imagine that you could replicate the ideal conditions for any plant within the controlled condition of a container but you have to remember that many hostas thrive in far less 'ideal' conditions. Investigating the origins of the species uncovers a wealth of different growing environments, some of which I have covered in previous newsletters – [see archive](#).

Although it is hard to beat many of the older hosta varieties, many modern cultivars have the benefits of enhanced characteristics bred into them, such as resilience, reliability, colour and more. When this happens it gives us a wider choice of varieties we can use in our own gardens. The newsletter header photo of [H. 'Cutting Edge'](#), has the pollen parent [H. pycnophylla](#) (a slow growing and occasionally temperamental species) crossed with the pod parent [H. 'Salute'](#) (a good, reliable grower). The white underside and wavy margins of the former's leaves are coupled with the beautiful colour and form of the latter's leaves to produce one of my favourite modern cultivars, and it is a great grower.

This leads me neatly into a new series of newsletter content I have decided to call 'Great Growers' to highlight the cultivars we have experienced as being reliable and resilient. Not all varieties will be as garden worthy as their origins may suggest, especially the more

in preparation for the resumption of fencing.

We needed to remove the western bank as it was right on the boundary line, blocking everything. We had the 4 huge poplars taken down from the north side of the bank a few years ago but couldn't get to the stumps to do anything with them but now we can hire a stump grinder to finish the job.

### Looking north from the rear of the workshop and tunnels:



### Looking south from the north field to the rear of the tunnels:



There is still quite a lot of debris to clear and Roy and David have been working hard to get ready for the next phase which we will probably start after Christmas.

elaborately variegated ones that do tend to catch to eye. It can be tricky to know what to go for, so I hope this new series will prove useful. When I mentioned the idea to Lenore she came back with the suggestion of *H. 'Sum and Substance'*, and so it begins with Lenore singing the praises of this magnificent cultivar:

### *Greetings Hosta Gardeners,*

When we speak of great-grower hostas, *H. 'Sum and Substance'* immediately comes to mind. It is a classic hosta that is consistently beautiful and reliable, one that makes a statement in the garden. *Hosta 'Sum and Substance'* was first introduced in 1980 (F. Shaw, P. Aden). As people grew it and specimens began maturing, it prompted increased interest in hostas in the U.S. Its parentage is unknown, but possible parents are *H. 'Elatior'* and *H. hypoleuca*.



*H. 'Sum and Substance'* is a giant hosta, registered as 91 x 152 cm (36" x 60") with leaves 33 x 45 cm (13" x 18"), but it can become much larger. It is a triploid, having three sets of chromosomes, and is lutescent, turning from a lovely chartreuse to a bright medium golden color. It grows best in some sun. It was named Hosta of the Year in 2004 by the American Hosta Growers Association. Note that this was 24 years after its initial introduction, which speaks to its continuing value and success!

I planted *H. 'Sum and Substance'* in my garden in 2011 as a tiny starter plug purchased from a favorite mail-order nursery. I planted it in an out-of-the-way grassy area with little soil amendment other than a bit of compost, envisioning a future garden bed there. It grew and thrived, and when I did build the intended garden around it six years later, it was a magnificent specimen and a standout in the new garden. My *'Sum and Substance'* was partially shaded during late afternoon by a neighbor's large ash tree. The tree fell during a mid-summer storm, leaving the hosta suddenly in full afternoon sun, during an unusually

### **Stock-take, etc**

Meanwhile, whilst the boys have been working hard (playing?) on the machinery, I have been clearing dead leaves, cleaning trays and pots ready to do the annual stock take. I curse every year as my hands freeze during this work – there is no short cut to the process but this year it has been so much easier due to the mild weather. I am ahead of schedule too, which just shows how much the cold slows everything down.

I am writing this as we experience the first snow of the winter – a light dusting but because it's so windy, nothing has settled on the tunnels other than on the front edge of the porch on tunnel 4 – see banner photo at the start of the newsletter. I always feel happier if we have a little snow before Christmas as this often means we don't get such a harsh winter. I have probably jinxed it by saying that but if we do get a hard winter, it might help reduce the number of pests around next season.

Once I have done the stock-take I will have an idea of what we will have for sale next year.

This will not include all the divisions I am planning on doing once the spring is here. Increasingly, as we no longer buy in varieties for sale, we will have smaller numbers of rarer cultivars we can offer and so these won't appear in the lists until they are ready.

The Plant Finder list is always behind events as it needs to be submitted in December for publication in 2025 but you can

warm summer. While it can tolerate full sun, this was an abrupt change during mid-season, and it suffered, with leaves beginning to brown at the edges. I realized I needed to water it heavily during the transition, and it recovered. The following year it had adapted and was once again stunning:



H. 'Sum and Substance' has produced well over 50 known sports. I grow several of these sports, and all are great growers. If you've not yet grown H. 'Sum and Substance' in your garden, I encourage you to do so!

Best wishes and happy holidays to all,  
Lenore

NOTE: I list *H. 'Sum and Substance'* as having unknown parentage but Lenore mentions the potential origins in her piece. If you take a look at both of these suggested parents it isn't hard to see shared characteristics.

I have [H. 'Elatior'](#) in the collection but no longer have *H. hypoleuca* as it didn't like being grown in a container, and eventually they all failed. However, I did feature this species [in a newsletter](#), if you would like to read more about it. There is also a newsletter devoted to some the offspring of [H. 'Sum and Substance'](#). The list has grown since 2008 and although most grow well, not all are stable with their variegation and some have very subtle variegation so as to almost look like the parent from a distance.

Season's greetings and Happy New Year,  
**Team Mickfield Hostas**

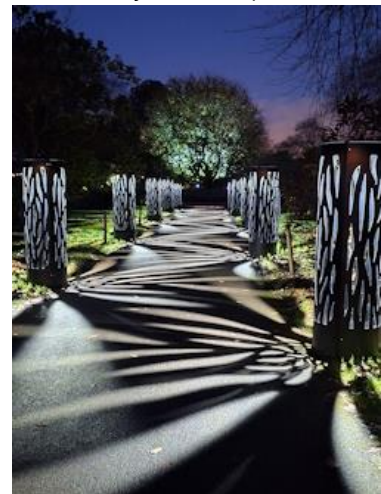
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always find out the latest by checking out our website, or emailing us during the season.

I also need to submit our annual Plant Heritage report, which is the state of play of the Collection plants, rather than sale plants. It is the AGM and reporting season after all, and now our APHA annual review is being done early too, it is still quite a busy time at the nursery.

### **Kew at Christmas**

I did get the opportunity to visit Kew Gardens a few days ago to help get into the Christmas spirit with their Christmas lights trail. It has given me a few ideas for my own garden, and maybe the nursery at some point.



I think this was my favourite installation, simple but brilliantly effective.